Karna in the Mahabharata: Loyalty, Friendship, and Empathy

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Karna: The Son of the Sun and the Neglected Hero

Karna is known as the son of the sun. Every human is traditionally protected by their mother, father, teacher, and God, but Karna was neglected by all four. When he was born, his mother Kunti abandoned him by placing him in a river. His father, the sun god, merely watched him float away and did not protect him. Thus, both his mother and father left him.

When Karna learned archery from Parashurama, he received a curse that he would forget all he had been taught at a crucial moment, because he did not reveal his true caste. Finally, Krishna, considered a god, took Karna's life on the battlefield. Therefore, the four primary sources of protection and guidance in life—mother, father, teacher, and God (Madha, Pitha, Guru, Dhaivam)—all failed him, making Karna the most empathetic character in the Mahabharata.The Birth of Karna and Its Parallels to the Story of Moses

When Kunti reached adulthood, she received a boon from a sage that allowed her to summon any deity and have a child with them. Out of curiosity, she invoked the mantra and summoned the sun god, who appeared before her and bestowed her with a child. This child, born with divine armor and earrings, caused Kunti great fear. As a young, unmarried princess, she felt unable to handle the responsibility of a child. Overwhelmed, she placed the baby in a basket and set him adrift on a river.

This story bears similarities to the Biblical story of Moses, although the circumstances and background differ. Both tales involve a child set afloat on a river to be found and raised by others.

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Karna's Upbringing and Naming: The Early Years in Athinapuri

In Athinapuri, a charioteer found the abandoned child and brought him home to his wife, as they were childless. According to tradition, only parents or relatives could name a child. Since the child had come from the river, they took him to a sage for naming. The sage, upon seeing the baby, was moved when the baby offered him a pearl necklace from around his neck. The sage, recognizing the child's generous nature, named him "Karnan," meaning "one who gives" and symbolizing his readiness to provide for others from a young age.

Though born a prince, Karnan was raised as an ordinary child by the charioteer and his wife. The next significant chapter of his life began with his training in warfare, but details of his childhood and teenage years remain largely untold.

Karna's Introduction and Friendship with Duryodhana

Karna's life intersected with those of the 100 Kauravas and the 5 Pandavas during a grand archery competition. In front of the gathered villagers, Arjuna showcased his exceptional skills and became the hero of the event. Duryodhana felt disheartened by his inability to match Arjuna's prowess.

During this competition, a man adorned with divine armor and earrings stepped forward, expressing his desire to compete and demonstrate that he was as skilled as Arjuna. However, Dronacharya and Kripacharya halted him, stating that the competition was reserved for princes. They demanded that he reveal his father's name, his mother's name, and his caste. Ashamed and unable to answer these questions because he was adopted, Karna attempted to leave.

At this moment, Duryodhana intervened. Demonstrating a profound understanding, Duryodhana addressed his teachers, emphasizing a key principle from the Mahabharata: one should not judge individuals based on caste, especially when it comes to educated persons, knowledgeable individuals, beautiful women, and brave men. He argued that dismissing their talents could drive them to join their enemies. Recognizing Karna's potential, Duryodhana declared him the king of Anga, a significant gesture that cemented their lifelong friendship. This pivotal moment marked the beginning of a deep and enduring bond between Duryodhana and Karna.

Karna and Duryodhana: A Complex Friendship and Karna's Training

The friendship between Karna and Duryodhana was deep and valuable. Karna often accepted Duryodhana's wrongdoings out of loyalty, but in the battlefield, he never hesitated to point out Duryodhana's mistakes and insisted on following the rules of war.

When Karna sought to learn advanced war techniques from Parashurama, he lied about his caste, claiming to be a Brahmin, on the advice of Shakuni, Duryodhana's uncle. Shakuni's suggestion aimed to balance the power between the Pandavas and Kauravas by equipping Karna with similar prowess. Though uncomfortable with the lie, Karna proceeded because he wanted to gain the Parasparsam weapon to support his friend.

Meanwhile, Indra, Arjuna's father, did not want Karna to possess such a powerful weapon. In a strategic move to thwart Karna, Indra disguised himself as a bug and bit Karna while Parashurama was resting on Karna's lap. Despite the pain and bleeding, Karna remained still to avoid disturbing his teacher's sleep. When Parashurama awoke and saw Karna's wound, he realized that only a Kshatriya could endure such pain without flinching. Feeling deceived, he cursed Karna, declaring that all the knowledge he had gained would fail him when he needed it most.

Devastated, Karna returned, feeling his efforts had been wasted. Shakuni mocked him, but Duryodhana, understanding Karna's pain and struggle, stood by his friend, reinforcing the bond between them.

Karna's Unmatched Generosity and the Loss of His Kavacha

Karna was born with a divine armor (kavacha) that rendered him invincible on the battlefield. Krishna, understanding the significance of this armor, devised a cunning plan to deprive Karna of it. He sent Indra, Arjuna's father, disguised as a beggar to ask for Karna's kavacha.

Despite recognizing Indra in disguise, Karna generously agreed to part with his kavacha. Indra, astonished by Karna's willingness to give away something so vital, revealed his true form and apologized. Karna, undeterred, painfully separated the kavacha from his body and offered it to Indra. This act highlighted Karna's unparalleled generosity and commitment to his principles.

Impressed by Karna's sacrifice, Indra felt compelled to offer something in return. Though Karna initially refused, stating that he never gave alms with the expectation of receiving anything back, Indra insisted. He bestowed upon Karna the powerful weapon Vaijeyanthi, capable of defeating any opponent except Arjuna.

Karna's Flaws and Loyalty to Duryodhana

Karna, despite his many noble qualities, had his flaws. He was fiercely loyal to Duryodhana and harbored a deep desire to defeat the Pandavas, even after discovering they were his brothers. This unwavering loyalty often led him to act as Duryodhana's instrument in their schemes against the Pandavas.

One of the darkest moments in Karna's life was during the disrobing of Draupadi. When Duryodhana and his brothers humiliated Draupadi by attempting to strip her in the court, it was Karna who initiated the idea, saying, "Why does a slave need clothes?" This cruel act stood in stark contrast to Karna's otherwise noble character and showcased his willingness to support Duryodhana even in morally reprehensible actions.

Karna, however, had moments where he tried to adhere to a code of honor. When Duryodhana proposed deceitful methods to defeat the Pandavas, such as defeating them through gambling rather than in battle, Karna objected and insisted on facing them in the battlefield. Despite this, he continued to support Duryodhana's plans, even when they involved humiliating the Pandavas and Draupadi.

During the Pandavas' exile, Duryodhana planned to flaunt a feast in front of them, knowing they were struggling for food. Karna laughed at the pettiness of this act but eventually supported Duryodhana's decision. However, when Bhima retaliated and made everyone run from the feast, Karna, despite his bravery, was seen running because he disapproved of the idea from the start.

When the Pandavas were in their incognito exile, Duryodhana tried to find and expose them to extend their exile by another 12 years. He sent his spies and armies to discover their location, but they failed. In a fit of frustration, he consulted his grandfathers, who reluctantly hinted at the Pandavas' whereabouts in Virata's kingdom. Duryodhana, along with Shakuni and Karna, went to confront them. Even then, Karna suggested waiting for an official declaration of war, but Duryodhana refused, and Karna, loyal as ever, stood by his friend.

These incidents highlight Karna's complexity: a man of great valor and generosity, but also one whose unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana often led him to support and partake in actions that were morally questionable.

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